

Governor Kate Brown
Inaugural Address as Prepared
January 14, 2019

Good afternoon everyone.

Thank you all so much for being here.

Senate President Peter Courtney, Speaker Tina Kotek, thank you.

To our Tribal Chairs and leaders, welcome.

To newly elected legislators, congratulations and welcome.

It's an incredible honor to serve Oregon for four more years.

Today is a little bittersweet for me, as this ceremony marks my final four years as governor. But, aside from how this feels for me, this is an important moment for our state.

In many ways, Oregon is progressing on ground that many of our neighbors wish they could tread.

Our unemployment rate is the lowest on record.

We have one of the fastest job growth rates in the country.

And in November, Oregonians defeated ballot measures that would have moved us backwards. Together, we used our vote to affirm Oregon values.

In many ways we stand alone.

For years we have struggled to overcome the impacts of recession on our state revenue, to build up adequate funding for our education system, and stabilize access to health care.

Our state is growing faster than at any point in our lifetimes. With growth comes a lot of really good things. More jobs. More ideas. And hopefully, more opportunities.

At the same time, not everyone is experiencing this prosperity.

Across Oregon, communities large and small are struggling with homelessness. This crisis is playing out daily on our streets — and on our sidewalks.

For many families, the cost of housing, health care, child care, and higher education are all outpacing wage growth.

And all of this is against the backdrop of a federal government that has never been in more disarray.

Now is the time to put our state on a better path forward.

The first step is to ensure that our democracy is strong. And fight every effort to undermine it.

Voting is our country's greatest collective responsibility, and we must vigorously safeguard the sanctity of our elections. While our elections institutions are amongst the best in the nation, we have more work to do to ensure that every single voice is heard.

I will work for campaign finance reform, fight for paid postage on our ballots, and expand our automatic voter registration system.

I'd welcome your help.

While other states are rolling back voting rights, Oregon is leading the way.

Vote by mail and Oregon's motor voter have made it so that we have one of the highest voter participation rates in the country.

But when it comes to campaign finance, we are still the wild wild west. This needs to end.

No one should be able to buy a megaphone so loud that it drowns out all the other voices.

Next, we are facing an affordability crisis in health care and housing that needs to be addressed immediately.

Health care is a fundamental right.

Because of the work we've done to expand the Oregon Health Plan, today 94 percent of adults have access.

And because of the work we did to pass Cover All Kids, every single one of our children has access.

Let's work together to make sure every Oregonian has the health care they need.

My budget sets forth a consensus approach as to how we stabilize funding for the Oregon Health Plan. Let's make it happen, and let's move quickly.

Families across Oregon need to know that they'll be able to see a doctor when they're sick. And that means giving them certainty as soon as we can this session.

Also fundamental is that every Oregonian should have a warm, safe, dry place to call home. And it should be affordable and accessible.

We have a housing crisis. We have to act quickly to help the chronically homeless and our children and families and our veterans.

My budget makes a historic \$400 million investment in housing.

It's an ambitious plan. But if we move now, we can get results quickly.

We can't keep doing the same thing expecting a different result, which is why I'm going to ask you to try something new.

If you approve a \$20 million bonding package early this session, we can speed up construction of 200 units of permanent housing for the chronically homeless.

We also need to help Oregonians who have homes but are struggling with the high cost of rent. When problems arise, they need technical assistance to stay in their homes and not end up on the streets. We can help landlords and tenants navigate this tight housing market.

Speaker Kotek and Senator Burdick have innovative proposals that will give renters some peace of mind.

Oregon families are counting on us.

They are counting on us so they don't have to make a choice between paying the rent and staying home with their newborn.

They are counting on us to make sure that their children are safe and that they can afford child care.

Let's work to take those worries off the table by working for paid family leave and affordable, accessible daycare.

As elected officials we have to prioritize our resources while leading during trying times.

I want to take a second to thank all of our state employees and volunteers who are working to keep federal facilities accessible to Oregonians during the government shutdown.

Government should be working for the people.

During my entire time as Governor, I have focused on spending every taxpayer dollar wisely. We worked together on this last session. We're not going to get credit for that work, but that's not the point. We still have to do it.

I am focused on several important items this session. And I put them in my budget.

First, adding internal auditors, who will ensure that every state agency is delivering the level of service that Oregonians expect while saving every penny they can along the way.

Second, eliminating backlogs and decreasing wait times in critical areas, like child-care licensing and food safety inspections.

Third, modernizing the way we deliver services and purchase goods. We can save taxpayer dollars if we streamline the way state government does business. Especially by implementing a new centralized procurement system.

While we tackle today's pressing fiscal challenges, we also must address the challenges of our future.

Today, we stand at a turning point, with an opportunity to put Oregon on a better path forward.

Our young people deserve to inherit an Oregon as beautiful and bountiful as the one we cherish today.

It is extremely painful to watch the effects of climate change on our communities.

The Rogue Valley was covered in smoke for over eight weeks last summer.

Ninety percent of our state is in drought.

And last year was the warmest year in Oregon since 1895.

Wildfires have increased in intensity and severity in the past decade, threatening our culture, our communities, and our economy. Oregon must continue to pursue solutions that will reduce harmful emissions while creating good jobs and building a clean energy economy.

A couple of weeks ago, I received a letter from Abner. He's 10 years old.

He wanted to make sure that I knew the consequences of inaction.

On one side of the card he drew an Earth struggling from years of global warming. "Hot, hot, hot," read the caption. The Earth was frowning.

On the other side was an image of an Earth in perfect health. A beaming smile stretched across the planet.

"What are you doing about climate change?" Abner wrote.

Well Abner, I hope you're listening. Because we're on it.

Twelve years ago, Governor Kulongoski set the limit on carbon emissions. And now, this session, we need to meet those goals.

Thank you, Governor Kulongoski for your leadership, and thank you to the legislators—both Republican and Democrat—for the work you're doing to lead the way.

I look forward to signing our clean energy jobs bill this session.

Just as our climate is changing, our economy is rapidly changing.

We need to make sure that every single one of our students is Future Ready.

That means each one of them graduates from high school with a plan for their future and the skills to compete in a global economy.

Higher education also needs to be more affordable and more accessible to Oregon families.

The good news is, our current strong economy gives us the best chance in a generation to address persistent, structural challenges in our education system. The time is now. If we wait, we'll only fall further behind when the economy eventually falters.

At one time, every Oregonian was proud of our education system. It was a promise that if you chose to put down roots in Oregon, your children would receive a world-class education and have the opportunity to achieve their dreams. But over the past couple of decades, we have failed to deliver on that promise.

We have not significantly increased per pupil spending since the early 1990s. While other states were able to invest in schools and take advantage of economic recoveries, Oregon has had to rely on state funds to backfill local property taxes.

How our state provides for the needs of our children is a marker of who we are as a community. After years of underinvestment, it's going to take more than just additional funding to bring our schools back to a level we can be proud of.

We have failed our students of color and we have left rural Oregon behind. Now is the time to close that opportunity gap.

Our education system is in desperate need of repair, reform, and reinvestment. It's like an old house that hasn't been maintained. The longer we wait, the more it will cost to fix it.

I will work with you, the business community, teachers, and parents to fund K-12 schools at a level that ensures our districts aren't forced to make cuts.

My budget also includes resources to stabilize PERS rates for schools. This is in addition to the dedicated investments we began last year.

The unfunded liability in PERS is not going away. We must accelerate our work to stabilize PERS rates so that new dollars go directly into the classroom.

Over the past year, we have worked with your Student Success Committee to build consensus on how to repair our schools.

We agree that we need to prepare an additional 10,000 kids for kindergarten.

We agree that we need to create a School Improvement Fund that invests in our students. And provides smaller class sizes and a longer school year.

We agree that every single high school student must have the opportunity to participate in job training classes like CTE or hands-on learning.

We agree that we need to attract, train, and retain the best teachers in the country.

And we agree that we have to keep tuition affordable and open the doors to higher education.

My expectation is that these investments we're making in education will improve outcomes for all of our kids.

Oregonians deserve transparency as to how their taxpayer dollars are being spent.

As Superintendent of Schools, I will streamline my oversight of our education system and ensure greater accountability. The Chief Education Office will sunset next year and the majority of the functions will move directly into my office.

We will hold school districts accountable by auditing the School Improvement Fund to ensure that new dollars are used to improve graduation rates, reduce class sizes, and provide a full school year.

I was the oldest of four kids. My mom taught me to squeeze every single bit of toothpaste out of the tube.

Oregonians need to know that state government is using every taxpayer dollar wisely.

Health care, housing, protecting our environment, defending our democracy, and investing in our children. These are fundamentals. But solving the problems before us, turning the corner—it's not going to be easy.

That's OK. We know how to do the tough stuff. We do it the Oregon way: Working across the aisle and around the state.

Urban and rural, Democrat and Republican. We do what we've done time and again: put politics aside and serve the people of Oregon.

And to the new members who are joining us this year, I offer you again my congratulations, and a word of advice: put on your metal underpants.

Politics can be messy, and a term in the legislature is not for the faint of heart.

But having the privilege to serve Oregon is an incredible honor.

And one that I take very seriously.

28 years ago, Barbara Roberts, the first woman elected governor of Oregon, was sworn in.

On this day. In this same room.

Thank you, Governor Roberts, for your advice and counsel and for opening the doors for women like me.

I also want to say thank you to Governor Kulongoski for being my friend and mentor.

I am truly standing on the shoulders of giants.

Even if they are short giants.

I started my career as an advocate for children and families and I intend to end it as one.

In closing I want to share a little bit about Jacob Burris. We met this summer.

Jacob is 17 years old. His mother paid for their basic needs by waiting tables. And Jacob's health care was covered by the Oregon Health Plan because he has a chronic health condition.

It hasn't slowed him down.

Jacob is incredibly talented.

He designs sweatshirts and shoes for the Doernbecher Foundation.

And thanks to the Affordable Care Act he's had access to the medical care that he needs.

His life decisions, including his profession, will be dictated by his ability to get health insurance.

Because Jacob has a pre-existing condition.

The good news is that unlike many states, Oregon protects people like Jacob.

And at home, he has a mother who works really hard.

Fortunately, she just got a new job with health care coverage and can start saving and finally get ahead.

I am so delighted that Jacob and his mom are here today.

Our state is at a turning point, just like Jacob's family.

Today we have a choice. Are we willing to do the work to make the dream of a better Oregon come true?

We are. And Jacob's story should serve as an inspiration to get this done.

In talking to Jacob, his diagnosis changed everything. But living with a pre-existing condition fueled his creativity.

He figured out how to communicate with the world in new ways, by designing shoes and sweatshirts that tell a story.

He has figured out how to talk about living day-to-day with a medical condition that will stay with him his entire life.

And in doing so, he has literally blazed a path for his future.

Maybe he'll get a job with one of our homegrown apparel companies. Or maybe he'll start one himself.

Regardless of what the future holds, I know for Jacob there's no looking back.

The time is now. Our future is in front of us. We have to turn the corner and make it a reality. Together we can build a better Oregon.

One that will make Jacob proud to call Oregon home.

Thank you.